

## LOWELL DAVID FLYR, 1937-1971

“OH GOD, WHAT A HOPELESS TEXAN AM I!”

Letter from Oxford, England; 9 Jan 1965

David was a *Texas* botanist. He'd like that said first and underlined. Suckled on the dry teat of a panhandle town in Texas (“Stratford, write Stratford”; his ghost is in me!), dying by his own hand at thirty three, we wept wondering why? For he was gifted; played Bach, picking it out on the piano precocious child (“clearly genius” his music teacher told me once, confiding in our aloneness, knowing I'd tell David later, and I did, laughing it over coffee; “sheit” he said, drawn out long through grinning teeth, pleased, warmed to his listening, “I'm the greatest Turner; better watch your women.”) That David, I used to think he's smarter than us all, the way he carries his 1575 (highest-on-the-campus) GRE score in his hip pocket like it were nothing 'cept an old photograph out of focus someone took once, catching him bent over at the hips looking at *Leucophyllums*, Texas Sage (*L. frutescens*). He was a westerner born out of his age; “maybe I'd of made it years before . . .”, he remarked once, “just standing around waiting for time to catch up.” He'd make a little remark like that once a day or so and I'd be haunted for hours wondering what he'd meant.

Big man; large boned; carrying fat sometimes up to maybe two fifty; and later, a couple of months maybe, he'd show up sixty pounds off in an ivy league suit speaking impeccable English chuckling with that little, deep-throated dog whimper endemic to him, he'd say, “remember me Dr. Turner? I'm full of wonderful vacuums”, referring to shock treatments for depression he'd taken voluntarily because it's good for the thesis, works out phylogenies, “didn't you know my mind was programed Fortran, needed plugging in.”

But it did; within two months after shock treatment he wrote his entire thesis, handing it to me intact, saying, “Here it is; you don't have to read it; it's fine.” I said, “ok, don't get bitchy.” Glancing over it briefly, remarking of a sudden, “I call that piece a wonder, now”, (remembering a line from Browning's *Last Duchess*; oh, David loved me for that; he was an intellectual first, maybe even only.)

About his thesis: for six years David wandered in and about the Botany Building at the University of Texas at any hour irregularly, taking courses whenever he couldn't talk his way out of them; disappearing suddenly into the field for no reason 'cept as how he wanted away, collecting whatever he couldn't avoid, pressing mostly *Leucophyllum* at first, but switching by degrees to *Brickellia* because, as I put it, “it grows daffodil in desert rock and nobody really gives a damn but you.” And he gathered a lot of field data about his genus, keeping it all in his head, rarely, if ever, making notes, except in contempt; and he retrieved it all, six years of it, in two



months time starting from scratch he emptied his vacuum. I was astonished.

But more than once! He astonished me on our first field trip. We were in Big Bend National Park (where he always took off to in moments of stress) and him not knowing beans about botany, “not even the name of a Compositae?” I asked.

“No, but I’m-a-willing to learn.”

He talked that way informally (to me at least; I took it to be his desire for identity with dirt farmers and things of his childhood and his father sitting on a tractor and David right there walking barefoot understanding everything excepting why he’d died when he was four: after that memories, only memories and long furrows). Leaning back, wickedly arrogant, David would ask “what’s that?” at 30 miles an hour along the roadside, “*Engelmannias*, *Lindheimeras*, *Berlandieras*” I’d respond, “lotsa genera”. And I think, swear, he learned to recognize and name maybe 300 species on that one trip, bragging how he’d have my job some day except that he wanted Professor Shinners’ position at SMU. *He* was his real hero.

It is appropriate then that David’s obituary be buried here in SIDA. Lloyd was the first to recognize David’s interest in botany; indeed, he instilled it. When Shinners suggested that he work under my direction for a Ph.D., Lloyd wrote to me separately stating, “If successful, the effort you put into the development of David as a taxonomist will be worth that effort you might put into at least ten other ordinary doctorates.” And whether this might have been so or not isn’t important. What is important to me is that *I* am a better taxonomist, teacher, person; having known him I carry a deeper sense of joy, laughter and, what other word, tragedy. He stood the test well: deeply sensitive and proud of his heritage, I never saw him flinch, beg excuses, cover his eyes with shakey fingers. David wore his profound (psychotic) depression so lightly (to me it was always so) that most of us mistook it for cautious wisdom, or aloofness born of the prairie or whatever else he managed to make it through the day with (and I’m thinking now that when he first corrected my illiterate pronunciation of the word *façade* he did so simply because that word was important to him personally).

I never understood that side of David except possibly once, just once I perhaps came close. We were atop the University Tower looking over the city, “gaining perspective” he said “sometimes when I’m depressed I come up here and gaze westward looking to the plains, seeking solace with my ancestors.”

“But it doesn’t help.” I said “David, it doesn’t help, I feel sick to my stomach, I’ve a barnacled anchor heavy on my shoulders, I can’t breathe, I have no perspectives, I’m depressed, for the first time in my life, David, I am deeply depressed.” David looked at me with a kind of eye-sharing we’d not experienced before, and he said, quite slowly, as though I might only this once hear the message, “Dr. Turner, that’s the way I feel *all* the time”. I cried, and I think he understood. Neither of us ever mentioned the moment again.



## In Memory

*Leucophyllum flyrii* Turner, sp. nov. HOLOTYPE (TEX, isotypes to be distributed): ca 4.5 E of Laguna Seca, 29 Jul 1966, *Flyr 1113*.

Species unica foliorum basi 3 mm. lato (aliae omnes maxime 2 mm).

Shrubs up to 1.6 m tall, much and somewhat intricately alternately-branched, especially above; foliage dense and somewhat canopy-like; bark dark grey-brown, conspicuously rugose or ridged and furrowed on oldest branches, inconspicuously rugose above; petiole scars and leafless somewhat spiny lateral branchlets tending to persist on old branches; branches leafless, except for the terminal 6-10 cm; densely pubescent when young, gradually becoming glabrous after several growing seasons; leaves alternate, densely crowded (internodes often less than 1 mm long), sessile, the leaf base often 1 mm or more across at attachment to stem; blade shape varying but most characteristically obovate-spatulate, broadest  $1/5-1/4$  of distance from apex and then narrowed very gradually with nearly straight sides to the base; distally: either rounded or somewhat angled from the widest portion to the obtuse or somewhat acute apex; mature blades (10-)12-19 mm long, 5-9 mm wide; midrib slightly raised on the lower surface except near the apex, not visible above; no lateral veins visible; blade rather thick and felt-like by the dense mostly closely appressed pubescence; pubescence of young stems, leaves, and pedicels very complex: of many erect, closely-crowded tufts, each consisting of a central axis with many radii (or each tuft, through suppression of the axis, merely a pile of these lateral hairs), in older leaves the tufts becoming obscured and the surface tending to appear a tangle of very fine hairs; flowers alternate or sometimes subopposite in the leaf axils, borne on pedicels 2 mm long and conspicuously more pubescent than the calyx, which is divided nearly to the base and consists of 5 lance-oblong sepals, 4.5-6.0 mm long, with somewhat attenuate tips; corolla appearing funnelform when pressed but dorsiventrally compressed and appearing subcylindrical in lateral view, narrowly campanulate or funnelform in dorsal view, 5(-6)-lobed and somewhat 2-lipped, 3(-4) lobes below the middle sparingly pilose, the middle 1(-2) extended, the lateral somewhat reflexed, the upper two less separate from each other than from the others; whole corolla up to 25 mm long, the lobes ca 6-7 mm long, the tube within almost wholly beset with many very small and dark purple spots up to 1 mm across, but intermixed with these are some oblong, dark-colored nectaries, internally sparingly pilose on or near the anterior lobe; veins somewhat prominent on tube, about 3 per lobe; stamens 4 or sometimes 5, alternating with the corolla lobes, didynamous, the posterior pair longer, filaments ca 8-9 and 11 mm long as measured from base of corolla, adnate up to half their length to the corolla, glabrous; anthers up to 4 mm long; ovary somewhat compressed laterally, with small swellings (nectaries?) around base, short pilose (or hairs somewhat branched) near summit, locules unequal (anterior larger); style ca 11 mm long, sparingly pilose,



stigma bilamellate; capsule 4.5 mm high, woody but thin-walled (less than 0.2 mm in diameter).

Distribution: one or two localities northeast of San Luis Potosí, S.L.P., Mexico.

*Leucophyllum flyrii* is known from a small area a few miles east and northeast of the city of San Luis Potosí. F. W. Pennell first discovered it at San Pedro which lies in low hills about 12 miles east of San Luis Potosí. As is true of other desert mining areas, very little woody vegetation remains in the area of San Pedro. I was unable to find *L. flyrii* there. Rzedowski, who collected San Luis Potosí rather thoroughly, made two collections of this species east of Laguna Seca, which lies a few miles north of San Pedro. After one unsuccessful search, I obtained from Dr. Rzedowski (*in litt.*) a detailed locality and was able to find the shrubs in flower.

The very restricted range of this species suggests two possibilities: that it is limited by some edaphic factor, or that its present range is but a fragment of a larger former range.

The species occurs at the southeastern edge of the more or less continuous distribution of *Leucophyllum* over the desert plateau of northern Mexico. To the south and east, increasing rainfall, with or without increasing elevation, allows development of a vegetation that does not include *Leucophyllum* until an isolated semi-arid area in Queretaro and Hidalgo is reached.

Specimens Examined: MEXICO. *San Luis Potosí*: San Pedro, Sierra Madre Oriental, 2150-2200 m, 29 Jul 1934, *Pennell 17735* (BM, F, MICH, NY); 8 km NE of Laguna Seca, 2250 m, 30 Aug 1955, *Rzedowski 6335* (TEX).

Except for the specific name, I have culled this newly described species of *Leucophyllum*, intact as to wording, from Dr. Flyr's unpublished doctoral thesis. To me it seems appropriate that one of the taxa in this genus bear his name. Commenting to me about *Leucophyllum* once, he said, "we are lovers". I liked that attitude and that's why I've wed them here.

Born: Lowell David Flyr, Stratford, Texas 24 Nov 1937

Parents: Bonnie Burns Almon Flyr and Lewis Anthony Flyr (deceased)

Education: Attended public schools in Cleburne and Denton, Texas

Graduated, Denton High School, 1956

B.A.—Southern Methodist University, 1960

Ph.D.—University of Texas, 1970

Honors: 1960—Phi Beta Kappa at SMU

1960—Recipient of the Avella Winn Hay award, as outstanding graduating male student

1960—Recipient, Research Award, Dallas Association of Phi Beta Kappa

1970—Research Fellow, Harvard University

Died: by his own hand, Woodlawn Hospital, Dallas, Texas 2 Nov 1971.

Buried: Stratford, Texas



## Publications:

1966

Chromosome numbers in the Compositae. X. North American Species. Amer. J. Bot. 53:24-33 (with B. L. Turner).

1967

New names and records in *Brickellia* (Compositae). Sida 3:252-256.

1970

A systematic study of the tribe *Leucophylleae* (Scrophulariaceae). Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin.

1971

*Thelesperma shinnersii* Flyr (Compositae), a new species from Coahuila, Mexico. Sida 4:276-277.

*Dyssodia tenuiloba* (Compositae): New to Mississippi. Sida 5(2). In press.

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